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Toward a Critical Poetics of Securitization: A response to Anker, Castronovo, Harkins, Masterson, and Williams

Marc Botha

In this brief set of responses to the five challenging and insightful articles gathered above under the banner *Security Studies and American Literary History*, I draw attention to what I regard as a particularly pressing area for future research on the relation between security and literary studies: the distinction of security from securitization and the implications this has for the constitution and lived experience of contemporary subjectivity. My contention is that there is a diminishing relation between the secure subject and the securitized subject. A critical poetics of securitization capable of exposing this growing rift with greater clarity thus constitutes a significant program for the broad field of literary studies. It also potentially provides the means for contesting the internal logic and relations between concepts such as vulnerability, fragility, and precarity on the one hand, and of adaptation, resilience, and robustness on the other. Indeed, a critical poetics of securitization further promises to shed light on the techniques and technologies of neoliberalism as dominant paradigm, drawing particular attention to its implication for the constitution of contemporary political subjectivity and the tensions which persist between virtual and visceral subjects, and between the biopolitical abstraction of bodies and the politics of viscosity that witnesses their return in terms of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and economic inequality.

I begin, however, with a brief excursus through Teju Cole's recent Twitter fiction, "Seven short stories about drones" (2013), which offers a remarkably concise and precise thematization of the problems and prospects for the intersectional study of literature and security. In these works, Cole splices the opening lines of canonical novels by Woolf, Melville, Joyce, Ellison, Kafka, Achebe, and Camus to stark and disturbing fragments depicting drone warfare and its consequences. Limiting each story to the 140 characters of a single tweet, the force of these works hinges on this violent parataxis well exemplified in the second of these: "Call me Ishmael. I was a young man of military age. I was immolated at my wedding. My parents are inconsolable" (Cole). Beginning with the opening of perhaps the most celebrated of all American novels, *Moby-Dick*, Cole shakes the habitual, delivering a shock to an historical past numbed by the familiarity of repetition, while the catastrophic present is intensified by the assertion of its connection to the past. He subtly indicts the US appropriation of vastly different strands of cultural memory to justify geopolitical intervention as so-called national security concerns, constructing micronarratives that offer themselves as critical

emblems of a securitized world. These works gesture toward a number of the central problems confronting the study of security under contemporary geopolitical conditions: the tensions between the local and global contexts of security; the ubiquity of technologies of securitization and surveillance and their transformation of the public and private spheres; the pervasiveness of insecurity as a justification for securitization; the paradoxical manner in which security is simultaneously indiscriminate and capable of targeting specific individuals and bodies; the increasingly porous boundaries between securitization and militarization; the explicit asymmetries of power that separate the agents of securitization from their targets, and correlatively, the implicit symmetries between securitization and the ascendancy of neoliberalism as the dominant geopolitical program.

As provocations to thought, Cole's miniatures gesture toward a larger critical program that Elisabeth Anker, Russ Castronovo, Gillian Harkins, John Masterson, and Merle Williams take up in various ways in the articles gathered above. These critics interrogate many of the themes I have identified across a range of literary and other cultural works; collectively, they reflect a nuanced vision of contemporary security as grounded in regimes of representation with complex historical genealogies and trajectories. It is not surprising, in this light, and in contrast to Cole's more poetic gesture, that they should focus on the significant role of complex narrative in coming to terms with the pervasiveness of securitization, nor that these narratives should be centered in North American literature. As Castronovo demonstrates, security as a coherent concept emerges with the rise of private property that accompanied the British colonial enterprise in North America, and it remains thoroughly imbricated with narratives of national identity – both factual and fictional, retrospective and speculative. And there can be little doubt today that the language of power – a language born with the proliferation of nuclear armament that Elaine Scarry analyzes in terms of the fundamental asymmetries of a thermonuclear monarchy (13–20) – remains a predominantly North American dialect.

In the shadow of genuinely universal threat, it becomes possible to discern a pronounced tension between security understood as a natural state and as a prerequisite for human, and even ecological, flourishing on the one hand, and security understood as a set of responses to a pervasive insecurity, on the other. The entanglement of these two views – intensified by notable political drivers such as the 9/11 attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, and the rise of Daesh – has resulted in the contemporary reformulation of security in terms of a normalization of insecurity. The prevalence of insecurity, in turn, gives rise to numerous and diverse protocols of securitization that purportedly

move toward a secure state, yet which in practice do little more than reinscribe security as an indefinite and finally unobtainable telos. It becomes clear in this light that security cannot be accurately conceived in static or uniform terms, but is, as Michel Foucault recognizes, a byword for the region of averages established by a speculative calculation of probable rather than actual events (6). Under these conditions, securitization threatens to become an autotelic, self-justifying, and potentially endless process: a politicized gesture emptied of its own potentiality; a dangerous politics understood, in Agamben's terms, as a means without end (57–59).

This normalization of insecurity is perhaps the clearest point of connection between the different approaches taken in the articles gathered here. As Castronovo demonstrates in his analysis of Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823), it is insecurity that defines the frontier experience of the settler-colonist, for whom surveyance and surveillance are regarded as twin imperatives in securing the property rights and accompanying right to privacy that ground the emergence of liberalism as political paradigm. Turning from liberalism's roots to the neoliberal state, Anker maintains that insecurity, which is focused through the operation of markets, acquires an ominous solidity as it passes through legal and regulatory structures, taking the form of a securitization of often already vulnerable populations – Anker's focus is on those represented in the celebrated television series *The Wire* (2002–2008) – ostensibly to limit the proliferation of an insecurity the state itself produces. In her analysis of Russell Banks's *Lost Memory of Skin* (2011), Harkins traces the ways in which a biopolitics of permanent insecurity and total surveillance, centered on the relatively recent figure of the virtual pedophile as online predator, gives rise to a regime of securitization based on possible rather than probable offense (cf. Amoore 8–11). That this modality should subsequently be extended to the overtly racialized

figures of the terrorist and the illegal alien is no surprise, reflecting the ways in which pervasive insecurity and the state of exception are mutually implicative, a theme Masterson develops in his discussion of Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009). Here we discover the cannibalistic logic of neoliberalism – also a principal concern of Anker's argument – manifesting in a particularly ironic form: securitization, often in the form of military intervention in civilian life, has become a standard response to crisis, whether ecological or political, generating the conditions under which citizens are routinely subjected to extralegal procedures that produce the insecure conditions they purport to address through a process Masterson associates with a hyperbolic politics of desecuritization. A focus on crisis similarly motivates Williams's recuperation of unconditional hospitality in her engagement with Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) – a radical response to the deep existential insecurity that follows traumatic experience, a theme she principally traces through the

consequences of the 9/11 attacks that drive Foer's narrative. Her focus is finally on a receptiveness to the incalculable that seeks to conserve an element of hope at the center of every uncertain, insecure future.

It is worth calling attention to Louise Amore's suggestion that "[i]t is here in the absolute unpredictability of things, in the impossibility of a probability calculation, that the correlation between freedom and security becomes visible" (117). Despite pervasive securitization, we persist in a situation of increasing insecurity and unfreedom – a paradox that is interrogated here transhistorically, from Castronovo's genealogy of liberalism, through Harkins's exposition of white hegemony at the heart of contemporary regimes of securitization, to Masterson's critique of the self-limiting systems that mark speculative visions of securitized futures. One reason is certainly that insecurity has more to do with the strategic pursuit of profit and power and with managing unpredictability than with developing ethical strategies of responding to aleatory events. Insecurity operates paradoxically by rendering instability stable, by emphasizing the predictability of unpredictability, and in the process greatly reducing our openness to the sorts of aleatory encounter that Louis Althusser identifies as the birth of new political sequences and possibilities (167).

The securitized subject is, of course, anything but secure, a theme explored extensively in the poetic work of Rob Halpern – one of the most singular voices in contemporary US poetry – which commits to an intense and sustained interrogation of the politics of catastrophe, crisis, and the exception, and its relation to the bodies of the economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised: queer bodies, black bodies, bodies subject to extralegal detention, and damaged bodies – all rendered in some sense vulnerable by the threats posed by the neoliberal state and its techniques of securitization. In his most recent collection, *Common Place* (2015), a work which revisits the state of exception as applied to detainees in Guantanamo Bay as a paradigm for coming to grips with the inhumanity of securitization, Halpern offers the following incisive formulation: "Having mistaken securitization for security, whatever it is my body craves has already been sold as the normal way of belonging to the things that own me" (37).

The predicament that the contemporary securitized subject faces is thus not merely a question of the loss of liberty to think, act, pursue the ownership of property, or the right to flourish—the liberal foundations of security that Castronovo traces – but also a failure of desire. The regulatory techniques and technologies of contemporary securitization preempt the anarchic element of desire, and what is lost is not so much the material markers of liberty, as the desire for true

liberation, producing an acquiescent passivity that David Chandler and Julian Reid descry as a principal marker of the neoliberal subject (3–4). Situated within a system of diminishing returns, this subject is one that is regarded as ready for recycling, as argued by Harkins, or else as utterly disposable, as demonstrated by Masterson. The passivized subject of a securitized, neoliberal state is increasingly unable to recognize the type of unpredictable encounter, which, to recall Althusser, constitutes the possibility of new political configurations and hence political change (169, 172–74).

Indeed, as Halpern suggests, under the conditions of contemporary securitization, we find ourselves always already situated within a complex system in which we are invisibly surveilled, quantified, abstracted, categorized, and transformed into functional data. The prodigious difficulty of resisting this situation arises from the fact that the social, economic, and political means of resistance have already been appropriated and redistributed to us in a manner that affirms the illusion of liberty. In this situation, exposing the deficits of neoliberal securitization becomes all the more urgent. Anker's analysis is particularly instructive in this regard, as she traces the breakdown of neoliberal technocratic rationality at the local level as individual actors subvert or fail to live up to the statistically driven representation of reality.

I contend that a critical poetics of securitization – recalling Hutcheon's understanding of poetics as an "open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures" (14) – has the potential to press such failures of representation in order to cultivate an openness to aleatory encounters and unpredictable events that challenge the received narratives regarding insecurity and securitization. That this openness is embedded within the complexities of literary form itself is evidenced in the prospects and problems of a critical narratology to which Harkins draws attention – a reminder that the effective and affective capacity and reach of the securitized storyworld should not be underestimated. Determining the precise relation of the representation of securitization to its material manifestations is a task begun by these articles but, not surprisingly, left open, in part because their authors follow eclectic conceptual routes: Masterson draws heavily on world-systems theory; Harkins interrogates the force of exemplification; Anker reveals the ideological inconsistencies of neoliberalism; Williams's insights are grounded in deconstruction; and Castronovo exposes the considerable significance of homology or structural consonance to a transhistorical conception of security. Although there is of course far greater subtlety to each argument than this schematic configuration suggests, my point is simply that this poetic must necessarily be composed of multiple conceptual strands and regimes of representation if it is to address the complexities of securitization adequately.

These complexities are intimately tied to the ways in which security and insecurity are located (Amoore 106–11) – spatially and temporally, but also in terms of specific ecologies and populations, subjects, and their bodies. Indeed, this point is pivotal to Castronovo’s genealogical account of security as tied to the right of pursuit and the claiming of wilderness as private property. It is no coincidence then that the home, as emblem of private property, should also become a paradigmatic expression of security. At the threshold of internal and external, private and public, access and exclusion, the home manifests, somewhat paradoxically, as “an institutionalized arena of privacy,” according to Ali Madanipour (71). Within the home, security is marked in terms of belonging – a sense of *heimlichkeit* or homeliness, as opposed to the insecurity associated with the *unheimlich* or uncanny. Martin Heidegger’s insights prove instructive in this respect: the home is not a location for dwelling simply because we live in it, but because it constitutes a site at which our existence is felt more intensely; a site for the gathering into presence of Being that is finally marked in terms of a poetic dwelling in language (150–51, 154).

Understood as the processual location of being and belonging, dwelling takes a more problematic and ambiguous shape when it becomes a means of uncritically exporting representations of the secure home to the sphere of homeland security. What does it mean, in this light to dwell securely? Habitually, the home itself becomes a securitized zone, emblematic of the complex protocols of controlled access rather than of a stable location. As Amoore notes, the contemporary understanding of security, regardless of the particular sphere to which it is applied, is overwhelmingly characterized by a “political economy of circulation and mobility” (125). In this light, security becomes increasingly dislocated, manifesting in the atopian “Nothing Spaces” that Williams describes above. The progressive transformation of the visceral subject to a virtual subject establishes a new and shifting region of insecurity which, as already noted, sets in motion protocols of securitization that incorporate increasingly invasive technologies and techniques of surveillance, examined in various ways by Anker, Harkins, and Masterson. Securitization is finally marked by dislocation: a capacity to move across boundaries, to migrate among discourses, and to manifest in different regimes of representation, delimiting the parameters in which subjects are able to locate themselves. In this light, one aspiration of a critical poetics of securitization must surely be to cast light on the biopolitical abstraction effected by the processes of securitization, in order to prepare the way for a generative embodiment of subjectivity that remains oriented toward the reopening of possibilities foreclosed by the governance of insecurity. This return to the visceral, as Judith Butler avers, is precisely not an affirmation of the self as absolute locus from which a world is to be

remade, but rather a reinvestment in radical co-emergence: “to be awake to what is Precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself . . . cannot be . . . an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other” (134).

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